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# The Presence of Disability in Horror Films: Ableism and Counter Discursivity

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EN 375: Crip Culture

Professor Susannah Mintz

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## The Presence of Disability in Horror Films: Ableism and Counter Discursivity

### **Introduction: Why Horror?**

Horror stories have existed as long as the human race. Consider the Greek myths, which originated the cyclops (the one-eyed monster), gorgons (female monsters with snakes for hair), harpies (part-human, part-bird creatures), and Cerberus (the two-headed dog that guards the gates of the Underworld). Consider also the Grimms' Fairy Tales, which made use of fear to teach young children lessons; Little Red Riding Hood, for instance, teaches children that talking to strangers can lead to kidnapping and murder (Everson 21). Mythological creatures and fairy tale lessons have been evoked again and again in mass media, and yet we never seem to tire of scaring ourselves for entertainment. Filmmakers even refer to horror film audiences as "pre-sold" because they need so little convincing (Everson 21). Five versions of *Frankenstein*, three versions of *Dracula*, and three other films that include these famed monsters have been produced; there is high demand for beloved characters and plotlines (Everson 21). William K. Everson notes that all horror film plots are so similar, they can be ordered into just seven categories: "scientific experiments," "monsters," "vampirism and lycanthropy," "voodoo," "old house," "necromancy and diabolism," "ghosts and apparitions," and an "unclassifiable group" that includes stunts and spectacles (22).

In this essay, I will be focusing primarily on the "monster" category, discussing its significance in relation to disability theory and activism. Everson describes "monsters" as

“misunderstood victims of social complexity” who are “usually two-thirds human” (23). In this statement, Everson first sympathizes with the monster figure, then participates in its dehumanization. His sympathy can only go so far, as he cannot feel fully compassionate towards just “two-thirds” of a human. Everson then goes on to argue that the “*really genuine* monsters of the King Kong family are so few and far between” that they nearly comprise a different category altogether (23, italics added). Here, Everson claims that the typical monster is not genuine. The Oxford English Dictionary defines “genuine” as “natural” and “pertaining to the original stock, pure-bred” (“Genuine” n.p.). Following this definition, we can understand Everson to be arguing that the majority of monsters are unnatural mutts. The very existence of a monster, he argues, is “due to the interference of some scientist, usually mad” (23). If a “mad” scientist – an unbalanced, often literally “insane” character – is responsible for the production or birth of a monster, it can be understood that the monster’s existence should never have happened to begin with; the monster is a crime against nature, the result of a human trying to play God.

Everson’s discussion of monsters shares many frightening resemblances to ableist cultures’ discussions of the disabled. When reading “two-thirds human,” I am reminded of Eli Claire’s response to the father of a disabled girl named Ashley. The father, claiming Ashley will always have the mental consciousness of a three-month-old, made the decision for his daughter to keep her forever in a child’s body. Doctors removed her uterus at a mere six years old, sliced off her breast buds, and flooded her bloodstream with estrogen. He calls Ashley his “pillow angel” (Claire 152). In his memoir, *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling With Cure*, Claire writes a rhetorical plea to the father:

*I know you intend pillow angel as an expression of love, but I feel those words in my bones as separation, exclusion, a denial of humanity, almost hate. Could Ashley simply be a disabled girl without words and the means to grasp the*

*decisions you and her mother made about her body-mind – not passive, not angelic, not a blessing? (154)*

Ashley was denied her humanity in that she was not able to control the decisions made about and for her own bodymind. Claire is angered by the expression “pillow angel” because it demotes Ashley from human to object. The expression highlights the father’s selfishness: a pillow receives the weight of others, and an angel is responsible for listening to and answering others’ prayers. Ashley may not be figured as “monstrous,” but she is certainly figured as less-than or even nonhuman. Her parents’ decision to alter her bodymind relates to the idea of cure (or what Claire might call eradication). Though they could not eradicate her disability, they chose to put their daughter through extensive medical procedures in order to match her physical body to her presumed mental capacity – that of a permanent child. Like a mad scientist’s creation, Ashley’s bodymind was seen as a mistake, and thus her parents attempted to “fix” it.

In this essay, I will explore several horror films that depict monsters in terms of disability. I will critique moments when nondisabled characters fall into patterns of ableist thought and action, and highlight moments when said thought and action proves to be detrimental; the latter will represent moments of progressivity not only in the horror film genre, but in media as a whole. My intention with this essay is not to dissuade viewers from engaging with horror films, but rather to direct their attention to the industry’s potential to alter preconceived notions – for better or for worse – of what it means to have a “normal” bodymind.

### **Misfitting**

Disability theorists David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder coined the term “narrative prosthesis” to point to the unique way disability narratives are constructed, approached, and received in life, literature, and film. While racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual identities are traditionally marginalized in literature and cinema through the utter absence of non-white, non-

cis, and non-heterosexual characters, variations of ability have always been widely present. The inclusion of disability in literary and cinematic contexts is fruitful in that it demands a narrative; in other words, the presence of one's disability provides a plot, subplot, or backstory that explains and/or justifies a character's behaviors and beliefs. When a body does not conform to pre-determined notions of "normal," we – the reader, viewer, or fellow human being – feel the need to identify *what* is different about the body, *why* the body is affected in this way, and *how* to avoid experiencing this difference in our own bodies. Narrative prosthesis serves the nondisabled mass by affirming their normalcy in relation to the Other (McDaniel 423).

Disability is commonly used as a metaphorical tool. Film and literature analyst Jamie McDaniel argues that, by utilizing disability as metaphor, media asserts to its audience that "real" or viable human experience[s]" are only received by and subjected upon "identifiably "normal" bod[ies]" (425). Nondisabled bodyminds are never depicted metaphorically, because it is understood that they represent the neutral, original, correct body form; they stand for nothing, projecting no other message than "I am human." Meanwhile, disabled bodyminds are traditionally contorted into symbols and tropes that posit them as far from human, far from neutral. In the horror genre, common disability tropes include the physically-mutilated monster – whose gruesome appearance reflects his inner evil – and the childlike being – whose innocence reflects moral superiority and, possibly, wisdom. The former are hated, the latter revered. In both cases, the disabled are objectified; they are seen as less-than human or supernatural.

The deformed-and-thus-inherently-evil trope can be observed in the typical zombie character. Decaying and discolored, slow moving, clumsy and grunting, the zombie is outwardly terrifying. Internally, they are no less threatening – they crave human flesh! Yet, the zombie character also complicates the simplicity of this trope by maintaining some recognition of,

connection to, and love for their still-living friends and family. Human characteristics, including “memory and trainability,” are preserved in the zombie; therefore, they are not completely monstrous (McDaniel 425). Zombie films’ plots often break the pattern in horror cinema that demands narrative prosthesis from characters with observable disabilities; rather than focus on *how* and *why* zombie characters underwent their undead transformations, narrative momentum is instead provided by the zombies’ recollection of life before death and their loved ones’ desire to reinstate them into society. Unfortunately, the livings’ attempts to mold the zombies back into socially acceptable citizens is no less problematic than their demand for narrative prosthesis.

Zombie movies tend to center around cure – around “fixing” the “problem” of disability to better integrate the risen into society. Eli Claire argues that said “fixing” – a supposedly charitable act carried out by the nondisabled community – hinders more than it helps the disabled population. He dissects the language of the ideology of cure, arguing that “cure requires damage” (15). Thus, it is agreed by supporters of cure that some degree of “harm” is located within a disabled person’s bodymind (15). What Claire describes here is the medical model of disability, or the theory that it is the individual’s fault for not adhering to society’s expectations. The blame is placed on the individual, rather than on the environment that isolates or rejects any and all forms of difference. Cure is destructive because it relies on the belief of an “original state of being” (15). The “original” bodymind – that which God, nature, or whatever controls our creation intended to produce – has today become synonymous with the “normal” bodymind. Unsurprisingly, many humans exist and will continue to exist (though their prevalence is decreasing due to in-utero diagnoses and hence abortions of disabled fetuses and other modern-day eugenics) that deviate from the proclaimed “norm.” Essentially, seeking cure is synonymous with supporting eugenic practices. Cure’s end goal, after all, is the eradication of the existence of

a disabled person. Ableist culture seeks cure because it relies on the belief that what existed *before* – reaching back to Adam, the original man – is “superior to what exists currently” (15).

Zombie films are often satirical, mocking the strategies one must undertake in order to be accepted as ideal and non-deviant in their society. These films “self-reflexively interrogate the role that metaphors of disability play in the horror genre” by employing them in films that target the nondisabled population (the default audience/voyeur) with the intention that the metaphors will come across as heavy-handed and thus stereotypic and insensitive (McDaniel 426).

Consider, for instance, Andrew Currie’s 2006 film *Fido*. This horror comedy takes place in “an Earthly world resembling the 1950s” after a cloud of radiation from outer space enveloped the planet, causing all previously dead and future dead humans to rise and rejoin the living (“Fido” n.p.). A governing corporation, “ZomCon,” works to establish control over the zombie population, most notably through domestication collars that, when placed around a zombie’s neck and activated, makes them “controllable and thus an eternally productive creature within society” (“Fido” n.p.). A bullied and lonely child, Timmy, befriends his household zombie (as all families feel pressured by ZomCon to help domesticate the undead population) and the two develop a relationship much akin to that of a boy and his pet dog. The zombie, called Fido, develops an emotional bond with Timmy’s mother, Helen, that she has always been missing and seeking from her emotionally-challenged husband. At the end of the film, Fido saves Timmy from being thrown to a pack of wild zombies by ZomCon’s security chief, whose intention is to punish Timmy for developing an affectionate relationship with a member of the undead.

Fido proves that it is possible for a zombie – a semi-human – to live a socially-acceptable life without a domestication collar. From a disability studies perspective, the collar represents a wide range of restrictive practices taken against those considered less-than-fully-human:

sterilization, castration, straightjackets, underpaid labor, deliberate overmedication, and seclusion. Fido succeeds in his domestication not because of his remote-controlled menial labor, but because he is greeted with Timmy's compassion and Helen's longing for company and emotional support. He observes and mimics the good natures of his adoptive family members and, unsurprisingly, becomes a better "person" than the zombies who are treated with disdain and/or trapped on the literal outskirts of society behind the fences of the community.

Another zombie story, Robin Campillo's 2004 film *They Came Back* (originally *Les Revenants*), takes a less-comedic route to address and demonstrate the adverse outcomes of ableism/an ableist society. A French village is infiltrated with approximately 13,000 risen dead. They are "zombies," but not in the classical sense. They are not decaying, do not crave flesh, and cannot transmit their zombie "virus" to the living. The returnees resemble the living population in nearly every way, except they all seem to be undergoing the effects one might expect from a severe concussion: aphasia, disorientation, wandering, trouble sleeping, and inability to engage in higher-order thinking and problem solving. Though the film lacks blood and gore, it is horrific in that "it presents an existentially horrifying and dreadful situation to viewers: ethical, humane reintegration of people who are no longer their former selves" (Rainey 17). The dread arises for the nondisabled, living population when they witness the changes in their loved ones yet must still care for them as if they were unchanged. The "terror" is in having to accept a loved one's new disabilities. The living may not be able to communicate and share experiences with their returned loved ones in the ways they had once taken for granted. The living are unsure of how to cope with the changes in their loved ones, as society has been so effective in teaching them to put the disabled away, out of sight. Yet now, they are encouraged to welcome their returned loved ones back into their homes. The living, nondisabled population is struck with confusion



about what choice to make in the face of their loved ones' return. Should they reject the returnees' presence, as one does with the elderly and disabled? Or should they work to accommodate for their returned loved ones' changes?

The zombies prove to be too exhausting of the living's time, money, resources, and love. Unable to control the undead and prevent them from retreating and meeting underground, the military is called in to gas them "back to death" in the form of permanent comas (Rainey 18). The returnees could not be "shaped and molded to fit the needs and expectations of the living," thus the society deemed it logical and necessary to eliminate them completely (Rainey 18). Family members and friends experience the death of their loved ones all over again, yet such heartache is ultimately considered less damaging to the living population than the strain of accommodation.

*They Came Back* depicts the (literal) deadly effects of ableist thought and action. The nondisabled population considers the zombies' lives not worth living, as they are a drain on resources and a constant reminder of human fragility. The consequent mass euthanasia is not an act of mercy, but rather one of selfishness and fear. Sarah A. Smith Rainey argues that the treatment of the returnees in *They Came Back* mimics the conduct towards and management of returning disabled soldiers. Rainey notes the "staggering" number of soldiers who return from combat with traumatic brain injury (TBI) and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), both of which cause symptoms including "memory problems, difficulty concentrating, anxiety, irritability, sleep problems, apprehension and 'interpersonal sensitivity and social alienation'" (21). Like many soldiers with TBI and/or PTSD, the undead returnees appear, outwardly, completely "normal. On the inside, however, they are "irrevocably different" from their old selves (21-22).

Returning disabled soldiers, like zombies, strain social infrastructure as they require care, accommodation, rehabilitation and admittance into well-paying job positions. France, in its dedication to equality, passed two laws in 1975 to ensure that their society would not erase or neglect the needs of the disabled population. The first law recognized “‘handicapped persons’ as a special group needing rights and protections,” and the second “created social and medical institutions to assist handicapped persons” (Rainey 23-24). These laws, though passed with good intentions, developed out of the medical and rehabilitation models of disability, thus figuring the disabled as “problems” (Rainey 24). In 2005, France replaced these two laws with the “‘law on the equal rights and opportunities, the participation and the citizenship of disabled persons’” (Rainey 24). This law has helped France move towards the social model of disability, which focuses on changing social and physical environments to better accommodate individuals with disabilities rather than attempting to change or cure individual bodyminds to fit the mold of accepted normalcy. The community in *They Came Back* upheld the medical and rehabilitation models of disability as they attempted to “fix” the returnees instead of recognizing that the real issues lay in the structure of their society.

The zombie motif works especially well to demonstrate the treatment of the disabled community because the undead are clear “misfits” in a living world. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson defines the critical keyword “misfit” as “an incongruent relationship between two things: a square peg in a round hole” (592-593). One becomes a “misfit” when their bodymind does not correlate with their surrounding environment. Thus, the effect of misfitting, or of being a misfit, is “exclusion from the public sphere – a literal casting out – and the resulting segregation into domestic spaces or sheltered institutions” (594). Consider, for instance, individuals who move with the assistance of wheelchairs in an environment without ramps. Their

inability to enter certain spaces is just one of many privileges they lack; inaccessibility sparks a chain of other missed privileges, such as “establishing relations that enable one to exercise the rights of citizenship in democratic orders” (596).

In *They Came Back*, the returnees are immediately placed in what is equated to a refugee shelter. When they leave the shelter in the middle of the night – as is the right of any free human in his homeland – an assigned shelter official expresses his unease:

MAN 1: Have you noticed? They’re pretending to sleep. In fact, they’re active all the time.

MAN 2: Odd, you sound angry with them. (00:30:05 – 00:30:22)

This shelter official goes on to explain that he has no interest in finding out if any of his relatives have returned. He is not convinced that the returnees are worth his time and effort, even if they are his family. He stares at the zombies, awake in their beds, and holds his weapon up as if ready to strike at any moment. Angry and armed, this shelter official makes it clear that he does not believe the returnees can be trusted to make decisions for themselves – even if those decisions are as simple as choosing not to sleep or to walk around outside. He does not want them to be granted any freedoms. Because they misfit, the returnees are segregated, sheltered, and denied freedoms that accompany full citizenship.

### **The Problem Body**

Throughout time, monsters – ranging from zombies to physically-deformed serial killers – have proved frightening to nondisabled viewers in that they represent the undesirable Other while maintaining some degree of human resemblance (through external appearance and/or through internal morality). The monster is a “problem body,” or a body “that resists easy classification because it exists “in between” established ontological categories like “alive” and “dead,” “self” and “other,” “human” and “nonhuman,” “able-bodied” and “disabled”” (Olney

295). The monster's body, quasi-human, discounts what Rosemarie Garland Thomson refers to as "the twin myth of bodily wholeness and bodily lack" (Olney 295). Rather than binary and separate, the lines between wholeness and lack are blurred through the monster figure.

Frankenstein's monster in Universal's classic *Frankenstein* (1931) by director James Whale is a perfect example of one such problem body. Dr. Frankenstein selfishly uproots a body laid at peace, cuts off the top of his skull "straight across like a pot lid," and replaces his damaged brain with another saved in a jar ("The Monster" 74). His body belongs with the dead, but is forced back into the world of the living. He has a recognizably human form, but is presented as a nonhuman object through the classification "it": "It's moving. It's alive! It's alive!" (00:24:55 – 00:25:08). He is both able-bodied in the sense that he can walk upright and disabled in his inability to communicate with the general public.

By describing the creature as a "monster," Dr. Frankenstein and his colleagues abide by the medical model of disability discourse; there is something "wrong" with the creature's bodymind that prevents it from being human. Confused and angered by his own existence, the monster rages and grunts at the men. The men interpret these expressions of discomfort as deficiencies in the creature's bodymind. Feeling that they cannot fix the creature's temperament (i.e. change him for the sake of easier control over him), the men decide that eradication is the only possible solution:

DR. WALDMAN: Come, pull yourself together.

DR. FRANKENSTEIN: What can we do?

WALDMAN: Kill it. As you would any savage animal. You must overpower him first. Get me a hypodermic needle.

FRANKENSTEIN: It's murder.

WALDMAN: It's our only chance. (00:36:33 – 00:36:43)

According to the medical model, "Fixing is thought to be the best path toward function and independence, and those who may not want to be fixed [or who cannot be fixed in the way the

able-bodied supervisor hopes] are considered noncompliant or unmotivated” (Haegele 195). The medical model places blame on the individual for misfitting.

The social model of disability discourse, on the other hand, would recognize that Frankenstein’s creature was doomed to displease his creator and fail to fit into his environment because society would not accommodate for his differences. When viewing the film from this perspective, it becomes clear that the monster’s intentions are not corrupt, but misunderstood. For instance, the viewer understands that the monster does not intentionally drown the child, Maria, with whom he was playing. He simply does not know his own strength and is unable to pick up on the cues that the child feels unsafe. When she does not immediately emerge from the water into which she was tossed, the monster hurries off in shock, panic and fright. His franticness indicates an understanding that his actions were harmful (00:50:22 – 00:50:47). His actions were not malicious, but inadvertent.

Another classic monster who exhibits a problem body is the titular character from Universal’s *Dracula* (1931) by director Tod Browning. A vampire, Dracula is evidently nonhuman. Yet he complicates the clear boundary between human and nonhuman by sharing a human capacity for emotional fragility and the ability to experience an existential crisis. In his chapter “The Monster” from *Terror and Everyday Life: Singular Moments in the History of the Horror Film*, Jonathan Lake Crane compares Dracula to “depressed humans” (73). Consider the moment the monster envies death: “To die. To really be dead. That must be glorious” (00:25:54 – 00:26:00). Hating his own existence, Dracula proves that he is self-aware – an undeniably human characteristic that shapes one’s morality. Crane explains Dracula’s inner turmoil:

Dracula was himself a victim, nipped and forced to continue an ancient trade. He was unwillingly apprenticed into eternal damnation; consequently, he is driven by two strong and definitely human traits: the urge to survive and the distaste for

cannibalism. In the tenuous balance of these two urges, with the “life force” being slightly stronger, he is exquisitely miserable. (74)

As with Frankenstein’s monster, Dracula’s monstrosity is diminished by his human qualities.

The Universal monster is truly “nothing more than a converted human” – one who is cursed (a word only applicable in the horror film context, of course) with frightening characteristics and/or abilities that force him into the position of an oppressed minority (74).

### **The Freakish Film**

Universal’s 1932 box office flop *Freaks* (by acclaimed *Dracula* director Tod Browning) is categorized by IMDb as “drama/thriller.” I believe, however, that the film falls easily into the horror genre. From an ableist perspective (which is that of most of the human population and thus the presumed audience’s), *Freaks* presents the ultimate nightmare: the inability of an able-bodied human to maintain bodily autonomy and to be given a punishment worse than death – life with disability. The film follows a travelling circus, whose party includes a beautiful trapeze artist, clown, cross-dresser, and individuals with congenital deformities including dwarfism and microcephaly who are referred to collectively as “freaks.” The plot follows Hans, a midget who is enamored with and eventually engaged to the able-bodied trapeze artist, Cleopatra. Hans’s attraction is no more than a joke to Cleopatra until she learns he is to inherit a large fortune. She then agrees to marry him, all the while laughing and conspiring behind his back with circus strongman, Hercules. Cleopatra attempts to slowly poison Hans in order to steal his inheritance, but the freaks catch on to her plan and enact their revenge before it’s too late. As a cohesive unit, the freaks (minus the bed-ridden Hans and his rejected midget fiancé, Frieda) attack Cleopatra and physically cripple her body. With amputated legs, a scarred face, and the unexplained addition of feathers and webbed hands, Cleopatra is transformed into the grotesque “chicken woman.”

*Freaks* capitalizes on images of physical deformity to incite fear in its nondisabled audience. So effective was *Freaks* in this intention, MGM executive Irving Thalberg felt it necessary to cut a large portion of the freaks' attacks after witnessing reactions to and receiving complaints about the film after its original premiere. The disastrous preview allegedly ran ninety minutes, meaning that nearly thirty minutes are missing from the subsequent, edited version available today. It is known that the cut footage featured Hercules's castration and other bodily mutilation as well as his final appearance as one among the freaks, though film historians have been unable to locate it; it is widely believed that the footage has been destroyed. One woman, who, after attending the 1932 test screening, claimed that she suffered a miscarriage as a result of the film's shocking nature, threatened to sue MGM for these damages. Another viewer is quoted in a letter directed to Browning, writing that he "must have the mental equipment of a freak [him]self to devise such a picture" ("Freaks" n.p.). The majority of the film's cast and crew were likewise disgusted with the disabled actors, some even staging lunchroom protests to fight for the segregation of the disabled and nondisabled. As a result, most of the disabled actors were forced to eat their lunch outdoors on makeshift tables. The MGM publicity department, too, repeatedly underscored the disabled performers' authenticity in promotional campaigns, marketing them as "half-humans," "grotesque freaks," and "monstrosities" (Norden 154). *Freaks* – onscreen and off – was built on a framework of ableism.

Consider the disabled characters' infantilization throughout the film. When Cleopatra notices Hans's reverence for her talent and beauty, she mocks his height – and thus his disability – by dropping her cape on the ground for him to pick up. He cannot reach her shoulders. She looks back at him and laughs under her breath. He appears unmanly in his inability to court the "Big Woman" through this chivalrous act (00:05:20 – 00:05:54). Each time they meet, Cleopatra

kneels down to reach Hans's eye level, as one does instinctively with a toddler but would deem impolite to do with a friend of the same age who happens to be shorter in stature. Cleopatra goes so far as to pinch Hans's cheek – an affectionate gesture one gives a chubby baby – at the end of their first interaction (00:06:35 – 00:06:36).

The other “freaks” experience similar infantilization when they accidentally cross paths with strangers in the woods. The group, which includes nearly every circus freak except for Hans and Frieda, are singing and dancing in a circle when approached by two men. When told they are trespassing, the freaks' able-bodied caretaker, Madame Tetrallini, comes to their rescue:

JON: Go away all of you! Don't you know trespassing's the same as stealing.

MME. TETRALLINI: Oh, I'm sorry, monsieur. I am Madame Tetrallini. These are children of my circus.

JON: Children! Monsters!

DUBOIS: Oh, you're a circus. I understand.

MME. TETRALLINI: So you see, monsieur, when I have a chance I like to take them into the sunshine and let them play like children. That is what most of them are – children. (00:07:57 – 00:08:33)

The freaks are unquestionably *not* children, but full-grown adults. The notion that the disabled are akin to children likely stems from the assumption that physical deformity indicates intellectual shortcomings. The group to which Madame Tetrallini refers as children includes those with skeletal growth disorders and muscular atrophy – two disabilities that have nothing to do with IQ. Yet, the freaks do not object to being called children in this moment. Instead, they huddle around Madame Tetrallini for protection. The freaks with less sizeable and “grotesque” physical deformities, on the other hand, take offense to infantilization.

Hans and Frieda are the most physically “normal” of the freaks; they are similar to their nondisabled counterparts in every way except for their small stature. Their relatively normal appearance allows for them to be taken seriously as intellectually capable adults both by the nondisabled characters and the film's audience. It is understood and accepted that unrequited



love, being made to look a fool, loss and shame are experiences and emotions that one can only encounter if they are fully mentally aware and competent. It is because of Hans and Frieda's intelligence that the viewer feels greater sympathy towards them than the other freaks (who are assumed to have lower IQs). "Stupidity," here and in all ableist societies, is used as "a tool to further marginalize" minorities like the physically deformed (Claire 157). If presumed to lack a certain IQ – whether this is true or not – one is not able to defend their life, worthiness, or personhood. As a disability activist, Claire urges the public to rethink the correlation between intelligence and personhood. He recognizes that affecting this change is not solely the nondisabled community's (i.e. the dominant population's) job. It is also up to people like him, who are constantly put in the position of feeling that they must prove their worthiness. It is difficult, Claire admits, to defend the notion that all intelligences are worthwhile when personally faced with "allegations or assumptions of stupidity or diminished mental capacity" (157). His gut response is to assert his intelligence, though this in turn promotes the idea that he is only worthwhile because he is distanced from intellectual disability.

In addition to their intelligence, Hans and Frieda are humanized through "highly gender-coded and normalized activities," such as bickering over coffee and folding laundry (Norden 163). They fall into place with "sex-role expectations" (Norden 163). For instance, when, out of concern for his health and performance quality, Frieda urges Hans not to smoke such a big cigar before the next show, he replies, "If I want a cigar, I smoke a cigar. I want no orders from the woman" (00:19:08 – 00:19:25). The couple are accepted and viewed as equals by their friends, able-bodied circus performers Venus and Phroso. When discussing Hans's new obsession with Cleopatra, Frieda and Venus bond over the struggles of womanhood:

VENUS: Frieda, something's wrong. What is it?

FRIEDA: Oh, nothing...only – well – that Cleopatra woman – my Hans – oh, I cannot tell you.

VENUS: She's still after Hans, ain't she.

FRIEDA: Yeah. Always she's smiling by him.

VENUS: Yeah, well if she smiles by somebody I know, she'll have to buy herself a new set of teeth.

FRIEDA: But why is it we women always have got to worry?

VENUS: Oh, it's always been that way. I guess it always will be. (00:21:26 – 00:21:56)

While the association between intelligence and humanity is troubling, these scenes of social normalization perhaps provide a more positive view of the disabled for the nondisabled audience. These scenes reflect “social realism” – moments that depict the everyday world in which persons with and without disabilities find themselves (Church n.p.). Hans and Freida’s treatment as man and woman first, disabled second, promotes the argument that *Freaks* is, in many respects, surprisingly counter discursive. Hans and Freida’s relationship troubles and general lifestyle provide pro-disability cultural intervention work by showing viewers that the disabled can lead “normal” lives.

*Freaks* is progressive in this sense in that it frames the narrative from the freaks’ perspective. Viewers see the world through the freaks’ eyes, thus figuring the nondisabled characters as the “Others.” The freaks become the story’s heroes, the nondisabled characters the story’s villains. This configuration breaks from that of the typical horror film, as John Thomas describes in his article “Gobble, Gobble...One of Us!”:

The movie monster is the embodiment of the nonhuman, the irrational, the inexplicable. It is through his destruction by fire, sunlight, or crucifix that we are purged of our own fear of the nonhuman. We must therefore identify with the victims of the movie monster, and find our release in the monster’s ultimate death. In *Freaks* [however], we are asked to identify with the ostensibly nonhuman, to turn against what we normally think of as our “own kind” and to discover in the humanity of the freaks a moral center for the universe. (135-136)

According to Thomas, the horror genre is fundamentally ableist in that it makes use of bodily forms that vary from the norm with the intention that they will cause fear. Browning's freaks, however, are not necessarily successful in fulfilling this trope. Though their physical forms might shock at first glance, their innate morality works to cancel out the viewers' fear. Thomas's argument suggests that *Freaks* is actually pro-disability and the disabled.

Consider, for instance, when Hans stands up for himself after Cleopatra is caught laughing at his inability to place the cloak back on her shoulders:

HANS: Are you laughing at me?

CLEOPATRA: Why no, monsieur.

HANS: Then I'm glad.

CLEOPATRA: Why should I laugh at you?

HANS: Most big people do. They don't realize I'm a man, with the same feelings they have. (00:05:35 – 00:05:50)

Cleopatra – the proclaimed beautiful woman – acts with evil intentions by purposefully placing Hans in an embarrassing position. Her action dismantles the assumption that outer beauty equates to inner morality. The freaks, too, complicate the opposing assumption – that outer ugliness signifies inner evil. While it is easy to accept the verdict that the freaks committed an evil act by deforming Cleopatra into “one of them,” it is notable that this judgement is, itself, ableist. To argue that the freaks' actions were evil is to argue that Cleopatra's altered state is somehow worse than her original body. Like an athlete who sustains an injury and must now make use of a wheelchair, Cleopatra's body is altered. While this athlete is likely to experience hardship in his transition to life with lesser mobility, he does not, in anyone's mind, lose his personhood. From the freaks' perspective, Cleopatra does not lose any of her worthiness as a human being in her transition to a freak. Yet Cleopatra – who never valued the freaks as fully human – believes she has lost all worthiness. Therefore, the freaks' true retaliation is not the act

of mutilation, but the forcing of Cleopatra into a role that she – not they – views and treats as inferior.

*Freaks* is not only progressive in terms of its anti-ableist messages; the film also successfully deviates from accepted gender stereotypes in the horror genre. In their article “Violence, Women, and Disability in Tod Browning’s *Freaks* and the Devil-Doll,” Martin F. Norden and Madeleine Cahill discuss the film’s unique employment of violent, disabled women. Historically, before the making of *Freaks*, male and female characters operated under separate, gender-based constructions: “the male-inscribed Obsessive Avenger and the female-inscribed Sweet Innocent” (160). Disabled female characters were not often violent villains. Instead, they were typically presented as harmless beings, often believed to possess special gifts and wisdom. When horror films did, on rare occasions, make use of disabled female villains, they were still distanced from disabled male villains in their motivations for revenge: “...the male Obsessive Avengers typically seek revenge for wrongs (whether real or imagines) committed against *them*, while the female ones do so for wrongs committed against others” (160). *Freaks* dismantles both of these tropes. The mutilation scene involves the violence of both disabled men and women, and both genders are motivated by the desire to enact revenge against those who wronged their friend.

Browning shattered many viewers’ expectations, not only in terms of plot and genre, but in his decision to cast actual disabled performers. At the time, such a casting was a major divergence from the norms of cinema production. Audiences of previous horror hits, including those of Universal’s monster franchise films *Frankenstein* and *Dracula*, could reassure themselves that “the freakish beings who appeared on the screen were played by heavily obscured able-bodied actors and/or rendered by special-effects technology” (Norden 153). With

*Freaks*, no such assurances could be made. Through his casting, Browning made two distinct yet equally notable achievements: first, he set the stage for greater inclusivity of disabled actors in Hollywood and second, he found a way to heighten shock value for horror film viewers. These achievements seem to butt heads; the former negates ableism by providing job opportunities and media representation for the disabled, while the latter promotes ableism by resting on the assumption that images of nondisabled persons should and will cause fright. The contrasting yet simultaneous effects produced by Browning's casting of disabled actors accurately represent the internal tensions and ambiguous nature of the entire film. *Freaks* both capitulates to stereotypes (the disabled are like infants and should be treated as such) and fights conventions (the disabled are not necessarily the villains). The film presents "monstrosities" but refuses to portray them as entirely lacking in humanity. *Freaks* is, itself, freakish; the film is a "problem body," abiding by some but not all conventions of the horror genre and resisting classification as either ableist or pro-disability propaganda.

### **Conclusion: The Responsibility of the Spectator**

The act of looking is necessary for all film watching. In her article "The Eye of Horror," however, Carol J. Clover analyzes the significance of looking specifically in relation to horror films. She notes that the act of looking at horror is "morbid and dangerous"; the camera quite literally invites us to look at something we know we should not enjoy seeing, be it murder, sexual perversion, or moments of insinuated privacy (Hsieh 144). The camera is our narrator, choosing what we can and cannot see, when we see it, and how we see it. As a viewer, one has the responsibility of recognizing when the camera is biased – when it doesn't show us the full story, or when it provides an ableist perspective. No film exists in a vacuum; everything presented in media has the potential to alter our perspectives on and perceptions of the real

world. As a responsible horror film viewer, one must understand that the presentation of monster figures is in no way (and will never be) a completely accurate, acceptable, or parallel depiction of disability.

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